

Lightning Ridge Road

Chapter One

“You spend money like we won the lottery!” Dad screamed. Jamie covered his ears and cringed in his hiding place.

“You’re just cheap!” Mom shrieked, close to Dad’s volume, only at a higher pitch. “But you don’t have a problem with spending on yourself!”

Jamie Randall hated it when his parents fought. When they moved their battle to the motor home’s bedroom, he crawled out from under the dining table.

That’s all they seemed to do anymore. They fought about everything. They especially fought about money. At least that’s what they were bickering over when he’d had enough and left the camper. He let the screen door slam behind him like an exclamation point at the end of a sentence.

He and Dad were supposed to go fishing, but that was off. When his parents yelled at each other, all promises were broken.

Jamie climbed up the sturdy limbs of the gnarly oak he spied beside the hiking trail. To his left, from his perch, he could see the sparkling green water of the Tenville River rushing over boulders. Off to his right, from the heart of the forest, the little Crooked Creek babbled and splashed down the cliffside rock face to the river below.

Yep. His parents fought and fought, and it ruined the camping trip. He wished he’d stayed home with his neighbor and best friend, Chubbs Martin. He wished Chubbs could’ve come up here with them. Oh, he’d asked, but then his parents went off on that idea!

Jamie wasn't ever gonna get married if all you do is fight, even if the girl looked like the babes in the posters hanging in Chubbs's dad's garage.

Shoot! He leaned against the tree's trunk and scratched his back like an old bear rubbing to and fro. He sure wished he had somebody to play with. If Chubbs were here, they'd build a fort in this tree. It had two big branches almost at the same level. With the lumber left over in the back of Dad's truck, they could frame a platform right across. He imagined curling up in his sleeping bag and looking up through the canopy of leaves, watching the stars. Betcha they could see all the constellations in the night sky up here in the mountains. Yeah! If Chubbs were here, they could sleep in this old tree.

For a moment, he stared up at the white cotton puff clouds that hung in the pale-blue morning sky. He gazed down at the stream lapping and crashing over rocks and fallen trees on its way to the river. The creek seemed to be laughing, maybe laughing at him. Anyway, it invited him to play.

Jamie knew there were crawfish in that creek. Last summer, he caught a whole basket full. One of those big suckers grabbed Chubbs's finger. Must'a hurt like heck, too, 'cuz Chubbs bawled like a baby. Jamie laughed out loud.

Jamie slithered down the fat tree trunk and jumped the last couple of feet to the hiking trail. He crammed the rest of his candy bar in his mouth and shoved the wrapper in a crevice at the junction of two branches.

He decided to get some of those crawdads. Mom could stick 'em in the big black kettle on the open fire. Dad loved crawfish with hot pepper sauce. Cajun style. That's what he called it. Maybe that would keep Mom and Dad from fighting tonight.

All the thoughts about cooking crawfish made him fiercely hungry. His belly rumbled. He peeled off his nylon jacket, tied it around his waist and headed down the slope and into the creek. He could tell it would be a scorcher today. The icy water seeped into the canvas of his high-top tennis shoes, and it felt great.

The blackberry brambles, growing in tangles alongside the creek, smelled just like sugar. Jamie stopped, picked some ripe, juicy berries, and stuffed them in his mouth.

He wandered up the creek bed, jumping from stone to stone. This looked like as good a spot as any. He turned over a rock, and sure enough, a greenish-brown crawfish scurried away from him, seeking shelter under the next rock. There were going to be lots and lots of crawfish. He removed his jacket and tied the sleeves together, creating a bundle. Carefully, keeping his fingers away from the snapping claws, he grabbed his prey and dropped the first of his catch into the jacket.

After a while, he had a good number and decided to return to camp with his prize. His parents would be so pleased. And maybe, just maybe, they'd stop fighting.

Jamie noticed a big flat rock; the dry top reflected the sunlight above the creek's water line. He opened the sleeves of his jacket for a peek inside the bundle. A mass of green bodies wriggled around against each other. He must have a hundred of those suckers in there. He re-tied the makeshift pack together again and started down the creek bed.

Up ahead, at the top of the slope that ran down from the dirt road to the creek, he saw two men, one taller and bigger than the other, struggling with a heavy bundle. The smaller man wore camouflage clothing and a blue baseball cap, and the taller one dressed in a gray and black jacket with a hood and khaki shorts. Their faces were in shadow, so he really couldn't make out their

features very well. He could hear them puffing and grunting as they wrestled with a brown plastic tarp.

Boy! Howdy! Jamie's dad would be spittin' mad. He hated people who came to the woods to dump their trash, ruining the countryside just to save the few bucks it took to go to the landfill. When he grew up, he planned to have lots of money. That's all there was to that! Money so he wouldn't have to fight with his wife; money so he could afford to go to the stupid dump.

They finally got the bundle over the lip of the embankment, and it began to roll down the rocky slope, causing a mini landslide. Rocks from above were pulled loose by the trash and splashed into the creek in front of him.

Transfixed, Jamie watched the filled plastic roll over and over, followed by a cloud of dust. As it tumbled, the plastic fell away from the contents inside. It only took a few seconds for Jamie to realize what he saw.

"A dead body? That's a dead body!" Jamie couldn't stop the scream from leaving his throat.

The men straightened and glared down the creek bed. For one breathless moment, the bigger man's stare locked with Jamie's. He saw Jamie clear as day.

Jamie dropped the crawfish and ran.